

PATENT

Foldable and deployable assembly of
elements mounted on board a spacecraft

The present invention relates to a foldable and deployable assembly of elements mounted on board a spacecraft.

5 It is known that many devices, such as solar generators, radio antennas, sun shields, etc., are composed of an assembly of elements articulated to one another so that said assembly may be folded and take up
10 a minimum amount of space on board a spacecraft, before and during the launch of the latter. After said craft has been put into space, said assembly of elements is deployed so that the device may assume its operational configuration.

15 For the articulation of such elements, it is known practice to use automatic-deployment articulation systems such as those described, for example, in documents US-3 386 128, FR-2 122, 087 and FR-2 635 077. To deploy these systems automatically, they use the
20 energy of springs that are tensed when said elements are in the folded position.

Such automatic articulation systems are relatively heavy and complicated and it is difficult to control
25 their deployment especially with regard to the initial instant and speed of deployment.

The aim of the present invention is to overcome these drawbacks.

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For this purpose, according to the invention, the assembly of at least two elements that is intended to be mounted on board a spacecraft and in which said elements may occupy with respect to one another either
35 a folded position or a deployed position is noteworthy in that said elements are secured to the same side of a flexible inflatable mattress and in that, when said elements are in the folded state, said mattress is in the deflated state and is folded so that said elements

are situated in pairs on either side of a fold of said mattress.

Thus, when, starting from the state in which said
5 elements are folded and from the state in which said
mattress is deflated, the latter is inflated, the
subsequent increase in volume of said mattress results
in the folds of the latter being opened and,
consequently, in said mattress and the elements borne
10 by it being deployed.

The inflation of said mattress may result from the
expansion, in space, of the gas contained in said
mattress in the deflated state, on earth. However, to
15 avoid any complication that might be due to the
residual air in the mattress during the launch of the
spacecraft, it is preferable, on earth, for said
mattress to be evacuated and, in space, for the
inflation to be achieved by blowing in an inflating
20 gas.

It is possible to lock said elements relative to one
another in the deployed position using many different
techniques. For example, said locking may be achieved
25 by stiffening the mattress with the aid of any
physicochemical stiffening system in orbit, for example
a curable resin. In the latter case, said mattress may
be impregnated on the inside with such a resin that can
be cured by a catalyst carried by the gas for inflating
30 said mattress. Said mattress may also be impregnated on
the outside by a resin that can be cured under the
action of ultraviolet radiation.

It will be noted that, because said elements are locked
35 relative to one another in such a way in the deployed
position, there is no need to maintain a nominal value
of the inflation pressure in said mattress in order to
stiffen the latter, an operation which would be

difficult to achieve on account of the inevitable microleakages in the inflation circuit.

5 According to the way in which said folds are formed in the deflated mattress, said folded mattress may either be arranged between two of said elements that are adjacent or surround two such adjacent elements.

10 In the case where said assembly comprises a plurality of elements forming at least one alignment, it is advantageous that, when said mattress is in the deflated state and when said elements are in the folded state, said mattress be folded on itself around fold lines that each pass between two consecutive elements
15 of said alignment and that are directed transversely with respect to said alignment so that, in turn, said folded mattress is arranged between two consecutive elements and surrounds two consecutive elements.

20 If, moreover, said plurality of elements forms an array of rows and columns, when said mattress is in the deflated state and when said elements are in the folded state, said mattress can advantageously be folded on itself around fold lines that each pass between two
25 columns and/or rows of elements so that, in turn, said folded mattress is arranged between two consecutive columns and/or rows of elements and surrounds two consecutive columns and/or rows of elements.

30 The figures of the appended drawing will provide a clear understanding of how the invention may be implemented. In these figures, identical references are used to denote like elements.

35 Figure 1 shows, in schematic partial cross section, an assembly of elements according to the present invention, in the folded position.

Figure 2 schematically illustrates the deployment of the assembly of elements shown by figure 1.

Figures 3 and 4 schematically illustrate in cross section and in plan view, respectively, the assembly of elements of figure 1 in the deployed position.

Figure 5 schematically shows another embodiment of said assembly of elements according to the present invention.

The assembly I of elements according to the present invention and depicted in figures 1 to 4 comprises n elements having the references 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, ..., 1.15 1.n-1, 1.n, respectively. These elements belong to a device (solar generator, antenna, sun shield, etc.) mounted in a folded position on board a spacecraft and deployed after the latter has been put into space. In the folded state (see figure 1), the elements 1.1 to 20 1.n are, for example, collapsed on one another and kept in this state by means of locks (not shown). When deployed, said elements 1.1 to 1.n form an alignment, as is symbolized in figure 4 by the axis 2.

25 These elements 1.1 to 1.n. are all secured to the same side 3 of a flexible inflatable mattress 4.

As is shown in figure 1, when said elements 1.1 to 1.n are in the folded state, the mattress 4 is in the deflated state and is folded so that said elements 1.1 30 to 1.n are situated in pairs on either side of a fold line 5.1, 5.2, ..., 5.n-1 of said mattress 4. These fold lines, or folds, 5.1 to 5.n-1 each pass between two consecutive elements 1.1 to 1.n and are directed 35 transversely with respect to said alignment 2 (as illustrated in figure 4).

In the folding mode illustrated in figure 1, when the mattress 4 is in the deflated state and when the

elements 1.1 to 1.n are in the folded state, it can be seen that, in turn, the mattress 4:

- is arranged between the two adjacent elements 1.1 and 1.2; 1.3 and 1.4, ..., etc.; and
- 5 - surrounds the two adjacent elements 1.2 and 1.3; ..., 1.n-1 and 1.n.

This mattress 4 may preferably be inflated from a gas source (not shown) by way of an inflating pipe 6.

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Thus, when said elements 1.1 to 1.n, in the folded state, are to be deployed and when said locks for keeping them in this state have been removed, inflating gas is passed into the pipe 6, this allowing said
15 mattress 4 to be inflated. The increase in volume of this mattress tends to open the folds that it comprises and said elements are moved away from one another by being rotated about axes that are at least approximately coincident with said fold lines 5.1 to
20 5.n-1, as is schematically illustrated in figure 2 with the aid of the arrows 7. By continuing the inflation, it is possible to completely deploy said mattress 4 and said elements 1.1 to 1.n so as to arrive at the deployed state illustrated by figures 3 and 4.

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It can thus readily be seen that, by virtue of the present invention, it is possible to have total control over the instant at which deployment commences and the process of deployment, and also to completely dispense
30 with any mechanical articulation system.

When complete deployment is achieved, the mattress 4 may be stiffened in this deployed position, for example using a curable resin. This resin may be pre-
35 impregnated over the outer surfaces of said mattress and be of the type that can be cured by the ultraviolet radiation in space. As an alternative, the curable resin may pre-impregnate the inner wall of the mattress

4 and be sensitive to a curing agent carried by the inflating gas.

Figure 5 depicts, in the deployed state, an array II of
5 a plurality of elements 1.11 to 1.pn. This array II
comprises p rows, each similar to the alignment 2 of
figure 4, arranged so that said elements additionally
form columns. It will readily be understood that, in
this case, the fold lines 5.1, 5.2, ..., 5.n-1 each
10 pass between two adjacent columns of elements. Thus,
when the mattress 4 is in the deflated state and in the
folded state, the columns of elements are folded on one
another around fold lines 5.1, 5.2, ..., 5.n-1, in the
manner shown in figure 1 for the elements 1.1 to 1.n.

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In addition to the inter-column fold lines 5.1 to
5.n-1, the array II may comprise inter-row fold lines
8.1 to 8.p-1 for folding on themselves (in the manner
of figure 1) said columns of elements that are already
20 folded on one another around the fold lines 5.1 to 5.n-
1.